"Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia," by Sabrina Strings, NYU Press, 2019

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Book Review by Hannah Carlan

In her award winning book, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phob* (2019), sociologist Sabrina Strings presents a meticulously researched history of th transformation of Euro-American ideologies toward fat from the Renaissance to the prese day. A major contribution to scholarship on racial formation, the politics of coloni knowledge production, and the history of medical discourse, Strings takes us fro Descartes to *CNN*, from John Calvin to *Cosmopolitan,* to tell us the story of how our wor has come to be dominated by fatphobia, or a fear of fatness, and the deeply anti-Black roo that this fear entails.

Strings traces the roots of fatphobia in anti-Blackness by weaving together seamles analysis of art, history, literature, philosophy, and science, offering exceptionally wid ranging evidence of the emergence of our modern hatred of fat in the historical wake colonization and the transatlantic slave trade. The enslavement and forced removal Africans to Europe and the Americas necessitated a new form of "racecraft," to crea whiteness as distinct from Blackness. What Strings demonstrates is that the subseque waves of racial formation in which whiteness emerged and was consolidated, not on involved the demonization of Black skin, but also relied on the identification of fat with Bla femininity, seen as simultaneously excessive and inferior. But it wasn't always this way, as stroll through the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York would reveal countless images voluptuous women idealized by the early moderns as the epitome of beauty. In today context, fat is synonymous with everything from disease to laziness. How did we get here?

Beginning with High Renaissance painters like Albrecht Dürer and Peter Paul Ruben Strings introduces us to the period just before enslavement reshaped the European soci imaginary, where shapely white Venuses were prized and plumpness preferred. B aesthetic preferences began to shift alongside the changing landscape of European citie like Antwerp and Venice, which were undergoing dramatic demographic and econom transformations with the rising slave trade. Black women became increasingly present artist's renderings, but were represented as thin, sickly servants, seen as lowly and inferior

By the sixteenth century, with slavery and colonization in full force in the Americas, extracte labor gave way to extracted resources, especially sugar. The reconfiguration of Europea diets and the mass accessibility of the "white gold" meant changing body shapes ar sudden anxieties around fat, particularly among the male population. It is during the ear Enlightenment that we first see the thinness admired as a sign of male rationalit Intellectuals from Shakespeare to Descartes dismayed corpulence as indicative of dir wittedness, with excessive consumption being primarily viewed as an obstacle to high

thought. This was bolstered by the post-Reformation context in which self-regulatic became key to cultivating morality, in which gluttony was one sin to be avoided.

But it wasn’t until the late seventeenth century that fat became a resource for raci categorization. The writings of early race scientists like George Cuvier, J.J. Virey, ar Georges-Louis Leclerc drew direct ties between gluttony, stupidity, and the characteristics Africans, whose idleness was attributed to their warm climate (a pervasive trope also four in colonial discourse about India). Enlightenment-era rationalism elevated food to the mor plane of asceticism required for intellectual pursuit. Soon, a thin physique had gone fro being a sign of sickliness to evidence of the moral and intellectual superiority of European supported by the writings of anthropologists and naturalists seeking to codify and biologize racial hierarchy. These works placed particular emphasis on the bodies of southern Africa women, who were depicted as grotesquely monstrous and animalistic while also serving a a source of voyeuristic fascination in formats like Cuvier’s traveling ethnographic menageri which featured pay-per-view displays of robust enslaved African women like Saartj Baartman.

By the eighteenth century, the “svelte ideal, this new ascetic aesthetic” (118) that was fir articulated by scientific race-makers had fused with the moral imperative of temperanc articulated by post-Reformation essayists in England. Travelogues from British women in th Orient like Lady Mary Wortley Montague—who is said to have only consumed milk—dec the “fleshy and ‘sensuous’ figures” (117) and unrestrained culinary habits of Turkish wome in order to affirm the superiority of lithe European women. Other scholars have similar noted the importance of the writings of Euro-American women for the consolidation of raci difference as embodied difference. In the North West and South Asian contexts, I a reminded of Mrinalini Sinha’s analysis of Katherine Mayo’s writings on India’s “oppresse womanhood in *Specters of Mother India* or Afsaneh Najmabadi’s history of the erasure the third gender category of the effeminate young man in the wake of European contact wi Iran detailed in *Women With Moustaches, Men Without Beards.* But it is in Strings’ analys that we finally learn how the construction of whiteness was also predicated on thinness a directly tied to anti-Blackness.

As the nineteenth century gave rise to American empire, so came the medicalized derisic of the figure of the robust Black African woman captured in the “proto-science of health ar beauty” (139). The thin ideal of white American femininity emerged after a period of mor panic surrounding American women as *too* thin, but by the mid-nineteenth centu magazines like *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book* begin to publish articles th directly tie fat to “African savagery,” as well as a form of “crime” and “deformity” (152). B as new immigrants arrived, anxieties grew around maintaining the superiority of northwe Europeans (of whom Celts and Irish were recently assimilated into an Anglo-Saxc whiteness). In an effort to define the ideal of American beauty, and thereby to sustain whi supremacy over immigrants and enslaved Africans, thinness grew as an index of both raci and class distinction.

By the early twentieth century, the culturally, scientifically, and religiously embedded derisic of fat as a sign of racial Otherness, intellectual inferiority, and moral debasement set th stage for a century that culminated in the newest moral panic around fat. The so-calle

"obesity epidemic," which problematizes Black women in particular as "social dead weigh (Strings 2015), relies on deeply political knowledge about bodies cloaked in rhetoric objective science. Culminating in a Foucaultian critique of various waves of medic discourse around fat in the twentieth century, Strings makes clear how the legacies African enslavement and genocide that solidified global white supremacy have relied c processes of racialization that inferiorize Black women's bodies as both overly sensual ar excessively shapely.

Without understanding how fatphobia emerged in response to slavery and in order to solidi whiteness as an embodied phenomenon, we cannot grasp how our contemporary obsessic with thinness is rooted in anti-Blackness. The most current manifestation of institutionalize fatphobia around "obesity" as a public health crisis is deeply reliant on the same ideologie that European race scientists drew on to construct fat as indicative of the laziness of boc mind, and spirit.

With the rise of the so-called "obesity epidemic," Black women's bodies continue to b subject to medicalized disgust despite the significant evidence that weight stigma, n weight itself, constitutes a serious health risk and predictor of negative health outcome The stakes of this debate around "obesity" are thus exponentially higher for Black wome but debates around medical racism rarely address fatphobia. As such, this text constitutes much-heralded contribution to our understanding of the relationship between whi supremacy and thin supremacy.

Strings' research shows that Western medicine has always relied upon the brutalization ar dehumanization of Black people, who were often forcefully subjected to medical researc and unanesthetized surgeries under the guise of "scientific discovery." The contempora aversion toward people in large bodies is inextricable from these historical processes objectifying fatness as a sign of racial inferiority.

As a scholarly text jam-packed with historical analysis and cultural critique, *Fearing th Black Body* has found resonance with audiences ranging from *Scientific American* [https www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-racist-roots-of-fighting-obesity2/] to the *New Yo Times* [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/opinion/coronavirus-race-obesity.html] to Instagram. As quickly as it has spread, it has sparked necessary discussions about the ro of anti-Blackness in our obsession with weight. Whereas ample research has show medical racism to be rampant in everything from clinical studies to the disparate treatmen received by Black patients, the field of dietetics and nutrition studies is only now warming u to discussions of racism in the field, but not of the field itself *as racist,* that is, as arising fro the same race-making impetuses of early health scientists and magazine editors wh unceremoniously disparaged fatness as a form of racial and moral savagery.

FEARING THE
BLACK
BODY
The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia
SABRINA STRINGS
bodyposipanda • Following
Any conversation about fatphobia that doesn't recognise its deeply anti-black roots is incomplete. And I would really recommend reading this book to understand why. There is SO much information to process, but this sums it up pretty well:
"The image of fat black women as "savage" and "barbarous" in art, philosophy, and science, and as "diseased" in medicine has been used to both degrade black women and discipline white women... The fear of the black body was integral to the creation of the slender aesthetic".
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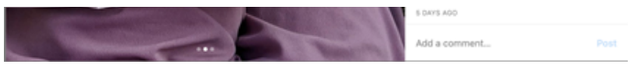
In an interview for the podcast *Food Psyc* (Episode 196 [https://www.youtube.com watch?v=PkhH_2mD2iw]), Strings reca one of the many questions she is asked b skeptics: what do we make of the fact th white women are also impacted by fatphob today—doesn't that mean it's *not* actual



Body positivity Instagram influencer and author Megan Crabbe (@bodyposipanda) is just one of many popular figures in fat activist circles who has reviewed Fearing the Black Body for her audience of 1.3 million.

racist? Strings' answer is illuminating: "Th reason for fatphobia affecting white women because fatphobia is related to an Blackness… If fatness is related to Blacknes and if there was an entire movement in th United States where white people were tryir doggedly to prove that they were white ar not Black, then it's very important for whi women not to be fat. So there's a way in which fatphobia, being an index of anti-Blacknes very directly harms white women in contemporary America."

Strings' book affirms what many queer, gender-nonconforming, fat Black activists alreac knew, but has been largely unaddressed in the landscape of contemporary fat activisr While the mainstream strand of "body positivity" has been re-valuing fat as a either a neutr or a positive source of identity (much like being tall), this strand of 'fativism' has largely bee a space dominated by white women, who have only now started to catch on to the role racism in fatphobia. Meanwhile, many fat Black activists have long been approachir fatness from an intersectional lens, but until recently have been siloed into the category racial justice activists. Now, we see important figures like Sonya Renee Taylor, Roxane Ga and Stephanie Yeboah, among others, gaining wider audiences after years of working c the intersection of anti-Blackness, anti-fatness, and cissexism.

Strings' research provides a wealth of empirical evidence demonstrating that o contemporary obsession with thinness is inextricable from the historical processes wherel fat was objectified as a sign of racial inferiority. As the calls for dismantling institutionalize white supremacy have gained steam due to the efforts of Black activists, so must w decolonize our body politics by dismantling the diet industrial complex, "obesity" researc and the doctor's office (not to mention nearly every aspect of our media, from magazine hawking weight loss to reality television shows premised on the humiliation of fat people Maybe, in a few decades, it won't be controversial anymore to say what Strings and othe have shown: your desire to be thin at all costs? That's racist.

***Hannah Carlan** is a PhD candidate in Anthropology. Her work broadly addresses th gendered politics of multilingualism in contemporary India, with particular emphasis on hc everyday linguistic practices shape rural development efforts in the Himalayas. She is recipient of the 2019-2020 Jean Stone Dissertation Research Fellowship [https csw.ucla.edu/funding/graduate-students/jean-stone-fellowship/] .*

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